

FORT GANSEVOORT



Willie Birch Stories to Tell Announces National Tour

Leon Taylor – April 23, 2026



Willie Birch, *Memories of the 60s*, 1992, Courtesy of the artist

The American Federation of Arts has announced the national tour of *Willie Birch: Stories to Tell*, a sweeping exhibition that traces the groundbreaking artist's singular vision of the Black American experience. Co-organized with the *New Orleans Museum of Art*, the exhibition brings together six decades of work, spanning from the late 1960s to the present, marking the first retrospective of this size and scope dedicated to Willie Birch.

The national tour begins at the *California African American Museum* in Los Angeles on May 5, where audiences will be introduced to Birch's deeply narrative practice. A New Orleans based artist, cultural provocateur, and community organizer, Birch has long centered storytelling in his work. "Content dictates process. I care about the story. The process I use for the work comes after I have a story to tell," Birch explains. His practice spans a wide range of media, including painting, large scale drawing, wood and papier-mâché sculpture, and public art commissions. Drawing inspiration from jazz music, Egyptian numerology, and American folk art, Birch's work forms a layered exploration of culture and identity.

FORT GANSEVOORT

Following its Los Angeles debut, the exhibition will travel to several institutions across the country. It will be on view at the *New Orleans Museum of Art* from March 20, 2027 through September 5, 2027, then continue to the *Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville* from October 28, 2027 through May 14, 2028. The final stop will be the Hudson River Museum, where it will run from September 22, 2028 through January 14, 2029.



Willie Birch, *Uptown Memories*, 1995, Courtesy of the artist

The exhibition is guest curated by **Russell Lord**, Chief of Curatorial Affairs at the *Norman Rockwell Museum* and a former curator at the New Orleans Museum of Art. He works in tandem with **Amanda Hajjar**, Assistant Curator at the AFA and project manager for the exhibition. Founded in 1909, the AFA continues its mission of bringing significant art to audiences nationwide through monographic exhibitions that highlight important artists of our time.

Accompanying the exhibition is a 208 page hardcover catalogue published by the AFA in association with Yale University Press, available for purchase in June. Edited by Russell Lord, the publication features

FORT GANSEVOORT

essays by Lord alongside contributions from **Grace Deveney, Leslie King Hammond, and Lowery Stokes Sims**, offering deeper insight into the impact and legacy of Birch's artmaking.

Born in 1942 in New Orleans, Birch trained in Europe, Baltimore, and New York, with his practice shaped in part by the energy of the New York art scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Central to his work is the concept of "retentions," a term he uses to describe cultural evidence of another culture's traditions within Black American life. Throughout his career, Birch has examined how African traditions have endured in music, art, and culture in America and beyond. His work questions why certain elements are retained while others are not, revealing complex and often uncomfortable truths about American identity while also opening pathways toward greater cultural awareness.



Willie Birch, *Evoking the Spirits of the Ancestors*, 2002, Courtesy of the artist

Willie Birch: Stories to Tell is organized chronologically across three major sections. It begins with Birch's early work from the late 1960s, moves through his shift toward papier mâché in the 1980s, and concludes with large scale charcoal and acrylic works on paper. Major installation works are interspersed throughout, often presented in more intimate gallery spaces to allow for deeper engagement.

The exhibition features more than 80 works, many drawn directly from the artist and Fort Gansevoort. Significant loans have also been provided by leading institutions, including the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the The Delaware Contemporary, the Chicago Children's Museum, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and the Sheldon Museum of Art, underscoring the breadth and significance of Birch's enduring contribution to American art.